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Calligraphers Prepare White House Invites

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Of Our Washington Bureau Staff

WASHINGTON—The invitation begins "The President and Mrs. Johnson request the pleasure of the company of . . ." and it only takes 30 seconds or so for the recipient to realize he has been invited to dine at the White House.

But it takes a good deal longer than 30 seconds to get an invitation into the mails. And most of the work is done by four calligraphers stuffed into a small office off the east wing of the White House.

Preparations for a large White House dinner begin from six weeks to a month in advance when the guest list is drawn up.

For example, the White House is planning a formal dinner on March 28, for the prime minister of India, Mme. Indira Gandhi to which some 200 persons have been invited. The White House calligraphers, led by their chief, Sanford L. Fox, sent out the invitations on March 8.

Each dinner invitation has been engraved in advance by the Bureau of Printing and Engraving except for the name of the invitee and the date of the dinner which are filled in by the calligraphers.

Fox estimates it takes from three to five minutes to write in the names of each person invited, two minutes to write in the date, and an additional two minutes to address the envelope.

The hand-written portions of the invitations are done in the same "bank note" script as the engraved portions of the invitations, and done so expertly that only the most eagle eye can tell the difference.

The envelopes are written with a fountain pen in black ink in ordinary script.

Included in the invitations were the following—a small engraved card designating the affair as "black tie," a larger card informing the person invited that the dinner is held in honor of Mme. Gandhi, and an "admission card" which the guest must present to the White House guards the night of the dinner.

The invitations are only the beginning of the calligraphers' job. They now are working on the menus, the programs and the seating arrangements.

Once a menu has been agreed to by Mrs. Johnson, the White House chef, and the housekeeper, it is given to Fox who makes an initial design, then sends it off to the government printing office where menus are printed in quantity. Every guest has a menu at his chair.

Each guest also receives a program of the evening's entertainment, also designed by the calligraphers. Finally, each place card is written and placed on the tables.

"Place cards can cause more headaches than all the other cards put together," Fox said recently. He explained that last minute cancellations can play havoc with the seating arrangements of 220 persons "especially if the absentee was to sit at the head table with President and Mrs. Johnson."

When not working on invitations—which seldom occurs because the President entertains about 15,000 persons each year—the White House calligraphers write in exquisitely detailed script the acceptances and re-

grets for the President, hand engrave presidential proclamations, write formal presentations which are given to ambassadors when they present their diplomatic credential. They occasionally even frame pictures for the first family, and once designed President Johnson's birthday cake.

"I like to think of calligraphy as a fine art and an expressive thing," Fox said. "And it is good when the lettering on the page speaks to you."

"Lettering is not just marks on paper, it's also breaking up the white spaces and it's good when it becomes a happy arrangement," he added.

Sanford L. Fox is a short, cheery, prematurely white-haired man of 45.

Although he has been chief calligrapher at the White House only five years, Fox has done part-time calligraphy work for Presidents since Franklin Roosevelt's fourth inauguration in 1944. Until January, 1961 his official job was with the Central Intelligence Agency, a job that he describes simply as "administrative."

Fox says he has always been interested in fancy lettering and became seriously interested in calligraphy after he won a scholarship to a commercial illustrating school after high school.

Fox disagrees with those who dismiss calligraphy as a dying art form. And he insists that it is flourishing. He admits that one of his problems is finding calligraphers to work in his office. "But we certainly receive a lot of applications; the problem is we want specialists—and as in any job, the specialists are hard to find."